

The Sociology of Meditation

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Abstract and Keywords

Sociologists study meditation as a social phenomenon, utilizing the contemporary practice of meditation as a window to larger questions about social life and organization in the contemporary world. This chapter illustrates how meditation serves as a new institution and social sphere that balances the “secular” and the “mystical” as well as “being together” and “being alone.” It embraces rising individualization and secularization, yet it is based on collective, joint circles where affective effervescence is produced and where people search for experiences that can be categorized as mystical, transformative, or therapeutic. The studies introduced in this chapter focus on three themes: meditation practice as a religious and spiritual phenomenon embedded in the contemporary world with its themes of individualization, secularization, and religious syncretism; the popularization of meditation as a social movement in a globalized world; and the micro-social world of meditation practice, focusing on social relations and the social self.

Keywords: sociology, spirituality, social movement, individualization, secularization, social institutions, social self

Introduction

Sociologists have been interested in the societal dimension of meditation practice, including macro-social structures, mezzo-level social institutions and movements, and micro-social relations. Early sociological studies on meditation were conducted mainly by sociologists of religion and were a part of the more general interest in Buddhist groups or new religious movements. As meditation practice spread, it attracted the attention of sociologists from multiple fields, including social movements, health, work, and microsociology. The large majority of sociological studies on meditation have focused on practices that are connected to Eastern traditions (mainly Hinduism and Buddhism) and were adapted to a Western audience. These studies tend to focus on meditation practice in English-speaking countries, with an emphasis on the United States and the United Kingdom.

Sociologists study meditation as a social phenomenon, exploring the connections between contemporary interest in meditation practice and the late-modern social world, including processes of individualization, secularization, and capitalism. From a sociological point of view, the contemporary practice of meditation serves as a window to larger questions about social life and organization in the contemporary world. The studies introduced in this chapter can be grouped according to three central themes:

- Meditation practice as a religious and spiritual phenomenon: this sheds light on transformations in religious practice in the contemporary world and indicates tendencies toward individualization, secularization, and religious syncretism.
- The popularization of meditation as a social movement: this focuses on processes of social change, the emergence of new social networks in a globalized world, and on strategies through which key actors adapt cultural practices to new social contexts and institutions.
- The micro-social world of meditation practice: this includes the social structures of meditation spaces and institutions, the social relations that meditation practice is embedded in or promotes, and how meditation practice relates to the social self.

In what follows, I first introduce the relevance of classical sociological perspectives to the study of meditation and the methodologies used by sociologists in their meditation-focused research. I then turn to each of the above themes and elaborate on the central questions and findings. I end with a conclusion on what the sociological study of meditation can teach us about contemporary social structures and relations.

Classical Sociological Perspectives

While early sociologists did not study meditation practice *per se*, their perspectives on religion, modernization, and individualization processes remain relevant and central in current sociological studies on meditation.

The most influential classical perspective is Weber's (1946a, 1946b) work on religion and the promise of salvation. Weber categorized contemplative practices, specifically Buddhist meditations, as "other-worldly" mysticism. Since historically contemplative practices were limited to monks and religious virtuosi, Weber saw in meditation a salvation strategy that includes both a negation of this world and a flight from this world. Thus, meditation was understood as part of a larger set of practices that helped the monk to reach enlightenment, practiced only by the chosen religious virtuosi and understood as the "personal act of the single individual" (Weber, 1958a, p. 206). Contemporary sociologists, who study meditation in the context of its popularization outside of the monastic context, frame their studies in reference to Weber's (1946a) "other-worldly mysticism" ideal type. Studies on contemporary meditation practice in the West understand it as a monastic practice that shifted from being "other-worldly" to being "this-worldly." These

studies track the shift in the kind of “salvation” that contemporary meditation offers practitioners (McMahan, 2008; Wilson, 2014; Kucinskas, 2018; Pagis, 2019).

Another important Weberian idea central to the study of meditation is the notion of the “disenchantment” of the world (Weber, 1958b). On the one hand, the sociological study of meditation challenges secularization theories by locating meditation practice as part of what has been called the spiritual revolution, illustrating the persistence and even flourishing of mystical and religious traditions in late modernity (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). On the other hand, studies of meditation practice (and spirituality in general) understand its popularization in the light of processes of rationalization and secularization common to modern society, as in some contexts meditation has been stripped from its religious context and turned into a therapeutic tool (Wilson, 2014; Kucinskas, 2018).

A second influential sociological perspective used in meditation-related studies can be tracked back to Durkheim’s (2008/1912) work on the elementary forms of religious life. While Durkheim did not write specifically on meditation, his work on ritual and the affective effervescence that characterizes collective rituals is used by sociologists in order to ask questions regarding solitary and collective meditation practice, especially in the light of processes of secularization and individualization in which the power of religious traditions seems to be declining (Giddens, 1991; Heelas, 1996).

Two developments of Durkheimian thought are particularly relevant to the study of contemporary meditation practice. First, Victor Turner (2017/1966) suggested the notion of “anti-structure” to capture the spaces where the social structure is bracketed and people are stripped of their “regular” social identities. He argued that in complex societies, where traditional rituals are of less importance, we find new spaces where such “anti-structure” can be produced, including alternative models of living or leisure time (Turner, 1974). While Turner did not study meditation practice per se, we can think of the meditation center, and daily meditation practice, as representing a space where individuals withdraw from their everyday social roles and identities, a place outside of “normative” social structure.

Second, Randell Collins’s (2004) work on *Interaction Ritual Chains* combined Durkheim’s ideas on affective effervescence with Goffman’s micro-sociological insights regarding everyday “natural” interaction rituals and Mead’s model of the social self. In his theoretical work on the micro-sociology of religion, Collins (2011) suggested that meditation can be analyzed as an internal interaction ritual, where affective effervescence takes place between two parts of the social self—the “Me,” the part that represents the internalization of social attitudes, and the “I,” the spontaneous, active part that responds to these attitudes. As he writes, “successful meditation is the high point of self-integration, carrying out an intense Durkheimian ritual but inside the self rather than in an external social assembly” (Collins, 2011, p. 15).

Methodologies: How Do Sociologists Study Meditation?

In contrast to psychological approaches, sociologists do not study the effect of meditation on personal well-being. The sociological study of meditation focuses on contemporary meditation practice as a social phenomenon. Empirically, sociologists have focused on the following questions, each with its specific methodology:

Who Practices Meditation?

Sociologists have been interested in the socio-demographic characteristics of the population that practices meditation. This includes race and ethnicity, gender, religious background, and economic, social, and cultural capital of practitioners. Data is collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods, starting first with national surveys that are based on representative samples. These studies do not usually focus on meditation per se, but offer information on meditation alongside other religious, spiritual practices, or use of alternative medicine (see Chapter XX by Conrad Hackett in this Handbook). Second, we have studies in spaces where meditation is practiced (such as centers and temples), including interviews with participants.

What Are the Justifications and Accounts People Use in Order to Explain Their Meditation Practice?

Sociologists study the justifications and accounts that people give when explaining why they meditate. In order to study this topic, sociologists use in-depth interviews that track the religious, spiritual, moral, and therapeutic justifications practitioners offer in order to explain their choice to meditate. These accounts are compared across populations, for example, by comparing the justifications given by self-defined Buddhists to those given by meditators who do not identify as Buddhists.

Who Are the Social Agents and Networks that Advocate and Adapt Meditation to New Social Contexts?

Sociologists define the spread of meditation practice as a social movement, exploring its diffusion and popularization. These studies have mainly utilized qualitative research including historical and ethnographic methods that locate key agents, their social positions in networks, their connection to social institutions (e.g., science, medicine, economic corporations) and their place and cosmopolitan identifications. In addition, content analysis of the discourses used in books, magazines, scientific publications, and advertisements is used in order to study the adaptation of meditation practice to its contemporary Western audience.

Where Do People Practice Meditation and with Whom?

Sociologists are interested in the social spheres and institutions that are established as meditation practice spreads. Research is based on in-depth interviews and participant observation, which document meditation centers, as well as collective and solitary practice, including new social spheres and institutions that incorporate meditation practice (e.g., hospitals, the army, prison). In addition, the recent novel method of experience sampling based on smartphone applications enable the tracking of individuals along the day with self-reports about spiritual experiences in their everyday life, including where these happened, when, and with whom.

What Is the Connection between Meditation Practice and Social Relationships?

Sociologists study the social relationships that surround meditation practice—either in communities of meditators, or between meditators and their non-meditating significant others. In order to examine such relationships, sociologists utilize qualitative research: observations of relations between practitioners in different spheres (including both the meditation center and daily life), interviews with practitioners, and interviews with non-meditating significant others (either family or close friends).

Current Sociological Study of Meditation Practice

Sociological studies understand meditation as part of larger social phenomena. These can be divided into three key areas: religion and spirituality in late modernity; social movements and institutions; and social relations/social self. An underlying theme that crosses these three themes is the resonance between meditation practice and contemporary late-modern, Western affluent societies.

Religion and Spirituality in Late Modernity

Traditionally those who practiced meditation were monks or a religious elite. The recent popularization of meditation with lay people (who are not ordained as monks or nuns) and with those who are not religiously committed can teach us about religion and spirituality in late modernity. Under this theme, we find three bodies of literature:

1. Studies that regard meditation practice as a small fraction of the larger popularization of New Age spirituality;
2. Studies focusing on Buddhist groups and practice in Western locations;
3. Studies interested in religious syncretism and the integration of Asian types of meditations into non-Buddhist/Hinduist religious practice, specifically Christianity and Judaism.

Meditation as Part of New Age Spirituality

The contemporary rise of interest in spirituality is understood by some as a challenge to Weber's (1958b) theory of "disenchantment" of the world. While the classical secularization thesis pointed to the decline of the importance of religion in the modern world, the visible growing interest in spirituality illustrates that religion is not disappearing—instead, it is transforming. Studies on New Age spirituality and new religious movements examine types of religious and spiritual practices that became popular from the 1960s onward. These studies examine meditation as one type of practice among others, including yoga, reiki, channeling, or Kabbalah teachings.

Early studies, conducted in the 1970s, depicted meditation groups such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Zen as new religious movements, sometimes characterized as cults (Campbell, 1978; Bainbridge & Stark, 1980; Bainbridge & Jackson, 1981). They found that people who were attracted to spirituality were searching for esoteric, mystical, or unusual experiences and resisted mainstream religious institutions (Volinn, 1985). As New Age spiritualities became more mainstream, studies shifted from a focus on cults and esoteric-alternative groups, to a focus on "individualization" or "personalization" of religious practices (Bellah, 1986). With the continuous decline in religious commitments, people can choose or even invent their own religious or spiritual practices. Meditation practice offers an appealing example of such personalization of religion, since it involves a turn inward and emphasizes personal experience.

One of the findings of spirituality studies is that participants in such groups tend to mix different practices and are not necessarily committed to one practice or tradition over the other. They can practice Buddhist meditation, take Kabbalah classes, and visit the church on Sunday with their family (e.g., Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Bender, 2010). This propensity to mix practices led sociologists and religious scholars to coin the term "spiritual market." This market has become a flourishing industry that involves choosing among a variety of spiritual traditions and practices, many of which involve paying for services; there has also been a growth in nonprofit organizations that offer meditation classes and retreats based on volunteering and free of charge. This marks a break from former religious practice, and points to the influence of capitalism and neo-liberalism over the sphere of religion (Redden, 2002; Irizarry, 2015).

Meditation and Western Buddhism

Although early sociological studies on Buddhism and Buddhist practice reference meditation practice, until recently this was of secondary interest. As meditation became more popular, sociologists interested in Buddhism began to pay attention specifically to practitioners of Buddhist meditation. In contrast to the above "spirituality" themed studies, this literature focuses on institutions, groups, and communities and thus does not emphasize the individualization of religion. Instead, the theme that cuts through contemporary stud-

ies of Buddhist practice is whether the spread of meditation practice beyond Buddhist communities represents a secularization of meditation.

As part of the secularization question, research on Western Buddhism frequently differentiates between two types of meditation practitioners, especially in the US context. The first are Asian (or cradle) Buddhists, either immigrants or second generation, and the second are non-Asian—usually White—practitioners, some of whom may self-identify as convert Buddhists, while others may be categorized as “sympathizers” of Buddhism (Tweed, 2002; for a review see Numrich, 2003). The first group is considered more religiously oriented, while the second group is viewed as meditation secularizers. Both groups are characterized by a relatively privileged economic and educational status (Wuthnow & Cadge, 2004). According to Numrich (2000), in Chicago these two groups coexisted side by side with almost no interaction. However, more recent studies challenge the separation of these groups, identifying joint networks that are connected to meditation practice (Cadage, 2005).

In her pioneering ethnography on Theravāda Buddhism in the United States, Cadage (2005) compared the two groups in order to understand whether these are indeed two distinct forms of practice. She focused on a Thai temple and the non-Asian Insight Meditation center in the area of Massachusetts. She found that meditation practice is important to both groups. However, “where” and “how” people meditated, and their justification for their practice, were quite different. Thai Buddhists took meditation classes in the temple, taught by a monk, and these classes were part of many other activities—including lessons on the teachings of the Buddha and Buddhist rituals and celebrations. In contrast, the White converts learned meditation in a meditation center, where all lessons and retreats were devoted to meditation-related activity (i.e., no rituals or celebrations), and they were taught by White American meditation teachers. In addition, lay Asian practitioners did not practice to achieve nirvana, as this was understood to only be accessible to monks. In contrast, Cadage found that many White practitioners believed that through the practice of meditation they could reach nirvana, even if they were not celibate and had not renounced family life.

In a more recent ethnographic study on Vipassana practice in the United States and in Israel, which focused on the teaching school of S. N. Goenka, I found that most practitioners were interested in meditation as a way to answer their concerns regarding daily life—emotional and stress management or the search for peacefulness and happiness (see also Goenka’s Vipassana meditation retreats, in this volume). Only a minority of serious practitioners showed deep interest in Buddhism or in enlightenment (Pagis, 2010a). In Weberian terms, the salvation that most practitioners of meditation are seeking has changed dramatically from being “other-worldly” and mystical-related (i.e., nirvana) to being “this-worldly” and related to subjective well-being, therapy, and mental health (see also McMahan, 2008; Wilson, 2014). Even though Vipassana retreats introduced the teachings of the Buddha (i.e., Dharma), neither meditation teachers nor practitioners identified as Buddhists. However, I also found that while relatively “secularized,” the teachings of Vipassana meditation in this group were based on a cultivation of detachment from this-world-

ly concerns and achievements, thus sometimes producing tensions with surrounding social relations and structures (Pagis, 2019).

Another study focused on the development of mindfulness meditation in the United States as the ultimate secularization of a Buddhist practice, which is now taught in organizations such as schools, business corporations, and the army, and include little or no reference to the Buddha (Kucinskias, 2014, 2018). Using interviews with the leaders of what she entitles “the contemplative movement,” Kucinskias illustrates the existing tensions between the desire to spread meditation to larger audiences that are not necessarily interested in Buddhism, and the spiritual and religious beliefs of the leaders that are much more connected to the teachings of the Buddha. While meditation teachers and supporters used secularization as a deliberate strategy to spread mindfulness practice, many of them also expressed concern that this strategy might be stripping the practice from its core Buddhist values and ethics (e.g., Purser & Loy, 2013).

Religious Syncretism

As interest in meditation crossed boundaries into other religions, sociologists became interested in such new forms of religious pluralism and syncretism. Studies generally focus on two religious groups—Judaism and Christianity—and illustrate how these groups produce new hybrids between contemporary Asian secularized meditation practices and the particular tradition of Jewish or Christian contemplative practices. While these groups are distinct from the Buddhist groups described above, studies show that similarly to the Buddhist-based groups, participants are relatively affluent and educated. In addition, like non-Asian Buddhist converts described above, practitioners of Jewish and Christian meditation are disproportionately White (Mermis-Cava, 2007; Sigalow, 2019).

Incorporating secularized meditation practice into Christian practice is considered relatively marginal, and as Bender (2010, p. 36) showed, is still troubling for many congregations in the United States. Still, some liberal and relatively pluralistic Christian groups have begun to incorporate mantra or mindfulness meditations in their practice, both in the United States (Mermis-Cava, 2007) and in Europe (e.g., Versteeg, 2006). The most institutionalized example of Christian meditation is the World Community of Christian Meditation, whose international center is located in London and includes over twenty-five centers around the world. The meditation practice was founded by John Main, who himself had experience in Asian meditation before becoming a Benedictine monk. The meditation practiced in these centers draws on the Christian tradition of contemplation while adopting the structure and social order of silent contemporary Buddhist meditation retreats. In an ethnographic study of this group, Mermis-Cava found (2009) that, on the one hand, Christian Meditation practitioners adopt a pluralist identity and belief “in the fundamental value of all religious faiths” (p. 440), yet, on the other hand, they anchor their meditation practice in the Christian tradition of contemplative practice, reject any notions of Asian influence or syncretism, and remain active in their specific Christian denominations.

The Sociology of Meditation

In contrast to Christianity, the incorporation of Buddhist meditations into Jewish practice is more prominent, especially in the American liberal Jewish denominations. In the United States, the percentage of Jews who participate in Buddhist-related groups is disproportionate to their number in the population. In Coleman's (2002) sample of Buddhist groups in the United States, 16.5 percent of practitioners had Jewish background (versus 2–3 percent of all Americans). Many of the key leaders and teachers of Buddhist-based meditations in the United States have a Jewish background, including Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg who founded the Insight Meditation Society; Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the popular mindfulness-based stress reduction program; as well as a number of meditation scientists and writers, like Richard Davidson and Daniel Goleman (Cadge, 2005; Sigalow, 2019).

The high interest in meditation among Jews in the United States led to the creation of Jewish meditation, a “new syncretic religious practice that has roots in both the Jewish and Buddhist traditions.” (Sigalow, 2019, p. 126; see also Niculescu, 2015). As Sigalow's ethnographic study shows, in these groups the connection between Jewish meditation and Buddhism is acknowledged, but at the same time pushed to the background. The founders of Jewish meditation had significant experience in Buddhist-based meditation practice. Some of them were teachers of Vipassana meditation. The practice of Jewish meditation includes reciting a Hebrew-based mantra, mindfulness sessions, and compassion meditation (*metta*). All these meditation practices are interpreted as having deep roots in Judaism, thus producing cultural linkages to the Jewish tradition. In some cases, the classes are delivered in synagogues, and the meditation classes are followed by discussions of the weekly Torah texts. Jewish meditation centers present traditional Jewish symbols that are sometimes woven into more Eastern ones, such as a Buddhist cushion inscribed with the star of David (Sigalow, 2019; for meditation syncretism in Israel see also Loss, 2010).

While these are only two examples of the incorporation of Eastern types of meditation into Western religions, the practice of Jewish and Christian meditation carries some similarities. Both the Christian and Jewish meditation practitioners are relatively liberal and are open to inter-religious dialogue. In both groups, leaders were influenced by an encounter with Hindu or Buddhist meditations, an experience that led them to revitalize contemplative practice in their specific traditions. Both encourage their members to strengthen their identification with a particular religion while at the same time understanding meditation as a universal practice. (For a history of meditation in Jewish and Christian traditions, see Persico, this volume, Laird, this volume, and Hovorun, this volume).

Social Movement and Diffusion into New Institutions

The popularization of meditation practice presents an interesting puzzle to sociologists of social movements, due to its decentralized and uncoordinated nature, as to the fact that the leaders of this movement lack a shared collective identity (Kucinskis, 2018). Sociologists working on this topic use meditation as a case study in order to learn about the diffusion of cultural practices, the mechanisms through which these practices enter new in-

stitutions, and the processes of social change. The study of meditation practice as a social movement focuses on three interrelated themes: the social actors that are involved in the practice and spread of meditation; the strategies used by leaders to facilitate this spread; and the adaptations and outcomes when meditation enters new, secular institutions.

Meditation practitioners in the West are relatively privileged with respect to education and income. For example, in the United States, a national representative survey conducted in 2012 found that greater education is associated with meditation practices and that Blacks and Hispanics are less likely to meditate (Olano et al., 2015; Cramer et al., 2016). There were similar findings based on qualitative research for Christian and Jewish meditation as described earlier in this chapter (e.g., for data in Brazil, see Rocha, 2006). Recent qualitative studies illustrate how meditation practice has begun to expand to new audiences—including studies of mindfulness in prisons (Paulle, 2017). However, this phenomenon is still relatively marginal and under-studied.

Another important finding is that, at least in the United States, there is a higher percentage of women involved in meditation practice than men. According to the 2017 US National Health Interview Survey, 16.3 percent of the women who participated in the survey reported to have used meditation in the previous twelve months compared with 11.8 percent of the men (Clarke et al., 2018). However, while women are highly involved as practitioners, men remain the majority among leaders and teachers. In Asian American groups, this bias may be connected to the traditional gendered role divisions that characterizes South East and East Asia. However, as Cadge (2004) shows, even in groups of American-born White meditation practitioners, who view themselves as completely egalitarian and “gender-blind,” men hold a higher proportion of authority roles in the organization.

When focusing on the leaders that advocate for meditation, studies show that these are individuals with a high social status, privileged by education, gender, and race. These include scientists, psychiatrists, and businessmen, who are globally connected to elites in other locations, including economic and religious elites in Asian Buddhist locations (Finney, 1991; Cadge, 2005; Rocha, 2006). In a recent study of the leaders of the meditation movement in the United States, two-thirds of the 101 interviewees were men, 85 percent were White, 96 percent had a college degree or higher, and many of them held prestigious jobs (Kucinkas, 2018). The spread of meditation is thus driven by an elite. In the context of the United States, many of these leaders first encountered meditation practice during the counter-culture period as young students and grew to hold prestigious social positions that helped them to mainstream meditation.

In regard to mechanisms of diffusion and adaptation, an early study on the spread of Transcendental Meditation (TM) analyzed its strategies and coined the term “marketed social movement” (Johnston, 1980). Focusing on marketization strategies, Johnston showed how TM targeted different populations and used different recruitment messages for each of them. Based on ideas of stress or tension reduction, self-improvement, rehabilitation, and spirituality, TM entered mainstream institutions, including business corporations, local governments, drug-treatment agencies, and prisons. More recent studies on

TM focus on legitimation mechanisms such as the grounding of meditation practice in scientific explanations (Humes, 2010; see also Williamson, 2010).

The recent popularity of mindfulness meditation offers a fascinating case study for understanding the mechanisms through which cultural practices are diffused. Focusing on what she calls “the contemplative movement,” Kucinkas (2018) illustrates how the study of meditation as a social movement can teach us how “previously marginalized, stigmatized cultures can be brought into mainstream, everyday life by an elite to initiate broader cultural and political change.” She further suggests that while during the 1980s meditation was considered a counter-cultural practice with negative connotations, a group of elite individuals worked in order to change this reputation. The spread of meditation is thus an example of a social change that was not advocated by people that questioned the status quo, but instead by an “affluent educated elite who work across varied professional fields such as science, healthcare, education and the military.”

Based on interviews with key actors of the meditation movement, Kucinkas (2014) identifies the use of non-confrontational tactics that do not threaten the secular character of the institutions. She illustrates how advocates of meditation blended into prestigious and dominant institutions. This meant framing their meditation programs as secular solutions to the problems of each specific institution. For example, in the military meditation was advocated as a tool that helps to maintain performance in violent and stressful situations. Thus, meditation programs in the army omitted any reference to Buddhist concepts of non-violence. After entering the institutions, meditation leaders were hoping to gradually expose practitioners to the values connected to the Buddhist Dharma (Kucinkas, 2018).

Maybe the most successful strategy for the diffusion of meditation practice is the use of the body-mind therapeutic framework. This framework, which challenges the traditional Western body-mind dualism, represents a hybrid of Western therapeutic ideas (including self-help culture) and Eastern bodily-based practices, from yoga to acupuncture to meditation. Paradoxically, the same practice that in the monastic Buddhist context was supposed to lead to the realization of not-self (a central Buddhist tenet) is now used to achieve self-healing and self-integration (Wilson, 2014; Pagis, 2019).

Sociologists that study the diffusion of meditation from the perspective of social movements debate its social and cultural influence on Western institutions. Some argue that the popularity of meditation is a part of the “Easternization of the West” (Campbell, 2015) while others see it as another manifestation of Americanization dubbed by critics as McMindfulness (Purser & Loy, 2013). Likewise, leaders and activists within the movement debate whether the strategies to popularize Buddhist meditation had the detrimental effect of diluting mindfulness practice and stripping it of its moral anchors. Thus, the blending and assimilating may have led to a takeover by the secular institutions, thereby closing the door for institutional change that promoted a Buddhist ethic or spirituality (Kucinkas, 2018).

Empirical studies that examine the adaptation of meditation to specific secular institutions confirm that such institutional takeover is indeed taking place. For example, Barker's (2014) analysis of MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) programs points to the problematic use of medical concepts in the attempt to spread meditation. She illustrates how the framing of mindfulness as "healing" leads to an expansion of the definition of "disease" and to a never-ending therapy-disease cycle. In other words, the entrance of meditation into the medical sphere strengthens the already existing increased medicalization of everyday life, leaving little room for institutional change. Likewise, Islam and colleagues (2017) point to the possibility of "takeover" by an institution, in this case the business corporation. Based on interviews and participant observation in mindfulness programs in the workplace, this study illustrates how mindfulness in the workplace re-affirms the dominant managerial perspective regarding profit and productivity, thus questioning the liberating potential that mindfulness may hold.

Studies that do emphasize the transformative power of meditation focus on the micro-level of self and social relations within the institution. For example, Paulle's (2017) ethnography of mindfulness in rehabilitation programs in the California state prison system illustrates how meditation has turned into a secular rehabilitation technique. While prisoners mainly join the programs in order to improve their application to the parole board, they sometimes end up "stumbling on the gold," as joint meditation produces an alternative social world and a new brotherhood that leads them away from the brotherhood of violence. These programs also introduce mindfulness to a population different from the privileged population discussed already. The large majority of participants are under-privileged in terms of education and economic status, and half of the participants in the programs examined were Black men.

Micro-sociology: Social Interactions and the Self

The practice of meditation has attracted the attention of micro-sociologists interested in social interactions, relationships, and the social self. Since meditation practice is an inward-looking practice, it raises questions regarding the social spheres in which such inward looking is enacted (usually silent spheres), the experiences of selfhood that meditation evokes (non-verbal and embodied), and the social order that meditation practice advocates (compassion, detachment).

Even though meditation is considered an "individualistic" practice, meditation training takes place in social, collective spaces. Meditation is learned in a group, where people sit in close proximity to one another. Reports from practitioners indicate that even after they have learned the practice and can meditate alone at home, they still feel a need to return to the group. When asked to compare their individual and collective meditation experiences, practitioners state that collective meditation leads to deeper and stronger experiences (e.g., Preston, 1988; Pagis, 2010b, Pagis, 2015). These findings are in line with the recent sociological experience-sampling study that found that people report higher experiences of spirituality when in the presence of others (Kucinkas et al., 2017; note that

this study did not focus exclusively on meditation, which was reported as one practice among others, such as prayer).

Sociologists analyze the interactive social order of meditation spaces and how this social order supports the achievement of meditative states. Based on participant observation and interviews in two Zen groups in Southern California conducted in the early 1980s, Preston (1988) looked at collective meditation as a joint ritual that is based on non-verbal interaction and results in emotional rewards that do not necessarily involve a change in belief. He found that Zen practitioners have limited social interaction, but are still subjected to the social control of the group. The most visible element of this social control is in keeping the right posture and not moving during meditation sessions. Since the posture in Zen meditation is not comfortable, and observation of pain and discomfort without initiating a change is a key to this practice, the social control of the group supports a meditative state of mind.

A key element of the interactive order of meditative spheres is silence. Studies of meditation retreats and group sittings in different traditions, including Zen (Fennell, 2012), Vipassana (Pagis, 2010b), and Christian meditation (Mermis-Cava, 2007), reveal the centrality of silence in the production of what I have called “collective solitude” (Pagis, 2019). These studies illustrate that in contrast to the common sociological view, which conceptualizes silence as alienating and breaking social bonds, the silence of meditation is constructive and, in fact, key to the production of a community of meditators. In my research on Vipassana retreats I found that even though practitioners do not communicate, they keep a subtle awareness of others. I found that within group meditation sittings, movement and non-movement are rhythmically coordinated, and that participants report to experience affective effervescence. I illustrate how the sharing of silence, and, with it, the relief from the need to openly verbalize or communicate, produces an ideal social sphere in which a group of individuals, often strangers to one another, can turn their gaze inward—each observing his or her own interiority together (Pagis, 2010b).

These findings can be extended to solitary meditation practice. Even though meditation can be practiced in solitude, it still depends on an imagined community. Mechanisms that invoke this community include ritualistic elements such as a fixed posture, recordings of meditation instructions, or chanting. These mechanisms help to maintain the community even in its absence. The recent popularity of meditation applications indicates the search for such a community even in solitary meditation. These applications offer an external social frame, which includes instructions, chanting, reminders, and even information about the number of people who are currently meditating with the application around the world, thus producing an awareness of a global community of meditators (Pagis, 2019).

A second “micro” venue that interests sociologists is the relation between meditation practice and the social self. In sociological theory, the dominant model of self and identity is based on G. H. Mead’s (1934) claim that the self is a social contrast that emerges through interactions with others. In everyday life, we are constantly responding to the “ME” that is reflected to us from others, thus maintaining social orders in which we hold

specific roles and identities. Once we perceive ourselves as others perceive us (i.e., by taking their perspectives and attitudes), we can turn ourselves into an object without the need for others by engaging in internal dialogues.

Meditation retreats and practice can be analyzed as “bracketing” the normative social structure, providing a space outside of our everyday selves. Such a space outside of normative social structure resonates with Turner’s definition of a “liminoid” space, a space where the practitioners take a break from the gaze of others and from the tensions induced by daily social interaction. In my ethnographic study of Vipassana meditation, practitioners described meditation as a “pause” from their hectic lives, a place to “recharge the batteries,” or a place where “I do not have the need to be in a form” as one practitioner put it (Pagis, 2019, p.82). Thus, while meditation is a social phenomenon, the collective sphere it offers is experienced by meditators as “anti-structure” when compared to their daily social life, a life characterized by hyper-connectivity and increased social complexity. This “bracketing” characteristic of meditation practice led some sociologists to advocate meditation as a tool in sociological research and teaching that helps to distance oneself from the taken-for-granted social reality (McGrane, 1994; González-López, 2011; Song & Muschert, 2014; Lee, 2015).

Sociologists have suggested models for the place of the social self in meditation. In his study of Zen meditation practice, Preston (1982, p. 262) claimed that meditation involves a “reduced role of the speaking self.” Extending this view, Boyle (1985) relied on his own meditation experiences to modify Mead’s model of the social self, suggesting that meditation enables practitioners to reduce awareness to the “Me” part of the self (i.e., the self as an object, which is perceived by and responded to by others), and enables a direct contact with the “I” part of the self (i.e., the spontaneous, subjective dimension of the self).

Drawing and extending these ideas, I coined the notion “embodied self-reflexivity” in order to capture the process that takes place in Vipassana meditation (Pagis, 2009). I argue that previous models of the social self emphasize language as the main channel through which self-awareness arises and neglect the place of the body as a medium through which people turn to themselves in order to gain self-knowledge and self-control. I illustrate how practitioners of Vipassana use meditation in everyday life as a tool to manage emotions, control social interactions, or create biographical-therapeutic narratives that are anchored in bodily experience.

How is this meditative form of self-awareness connected to social others? In his application of interaction-ritual theory to religious practice, Collins (2011) suggests that meditation can be analyzed as an “internal interaction ritual” taking place within one individual mind. Extending this idea I examined the relation between external interaction rituals and internal interaction rituals during Vipassana meditation retreats (Pagis, 2015). In the early stages of the retreat there is a resonance between the relatively embarrassing and uncomfortable external interactions and the scattered and disquiet internal dialogue. In successful meditation retreats, however, as the retreat progresses participants experience a change in both internal and external interactions—as they become comfortable

with the silence and physical proximity of others, they enter strong experiences of peacefulness (for Collins see also Van der Zeeuw et al., 2017; for more see on Vipassana meditation retreats, in this volume).

A third interest of micro-sociologists is the question of how meditation, a previously monastic practice that, using Weber's terms, enters everyday social life, and how meditators and their significant others understand the influence of meditation on their intimate relationships. This question extends also to the relatively popular compassion meditation, as compassion can be categorized using Weber's ideal type of brotherly love—oriented toward universal humanity at large while negating the social order of natural kin (1946a, p. 330).

In order to understand this under-investigated side of meditation practice, I interviewed both meditators and their family members or friends who do not meditate (Pagis, 2019). The findings reveal both resonance and tension within intimate social relations. Meditators report that their relationships are characterized by increased harmony, as they use meditation to decrease anger and increase compassion. At the same time, they also report that they feel less dependent on their significant others, feel quite comfortable when alone, some even mentioning a need for daily solitary time. While family members report noticing a decrease in conflictual interactions, they also report experiencing a level of social withdrawal, indicated by less engagement in the emotional togetherness of the family. For those living alone, meditation was reported as helpful in coping with loneliness, thus providing an explanation for why meditation practitioners in the United States are 25 percent less likely to be involved in a relationship when compared to non-practitioners (Cramer et al., 2016). These findings illustrate how contemporary meditation practice is used as a tool for achieving modern ideals of personal autonomy (Giddens 1991) and for coping with the growing individualization and solo-living (Klinenberg 2012).

Conclusion: Meditation and contemporary social structures and relations

What can we learn from the rising interest in meditation practice on contemporary social structures and social relations? While the above studies focus on different themes, they all emphasize the changing relationships between the individual and the surrounding social world in a globalized, post-industrial, secularized, affluent society, and how the interest in meditation resonates with these changes. These include: individualization processes that promote personal choice; new types of social relations and communities (including living alone and new forms of collective spaces); and secularization processes that change the practice of religion as the decline in commitment to a specific religious tradition leads to religious syncretism and mobility. Lastly, capitalist and neo-liberal culture of subjective well-being and therapy are pushing meditation practice into new contexts and institutions, a process that might change these institutions, but might also end in an institution-

al take-over, when, for example, meditation becomes a tool for increasing employees' productivity.

On the micro- and mezzo-social levels, meditation serves as a new institution and social sphere that, on the one hand, embraces the rising individualization and secularization, yet, on the other hand, is based on collective, joint circles, where affective effervescence and emotional energy are produced and where people search for experiences that can be categorized as mystical, transformative, or therapeutic. The fact that the people who are attracted to this institution are relatively privileged in terms of education, race, and economic status, teaches us about the kind of equilibrium between the "secular" and "mystical" and between "being together" and "being alone," that the affluent part of developed-world society is seeking. Future research will tell if meditation crosses boundaries into the less privileged population, and the kind of meditation-related social institutions and circles that will emerge in this process.

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